

David Cameron, **The Social Thought of Rousseau and Burke: A Comparative Study.** Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1973, pp. x, 242

The word "comparative" in the title is emphatic. Professor Cameron is comparing, not contrasting, Burke and Rousseau. The relative novelty of his study is its break from the radical opposition between these two thinkers as seen by the tradition. He believes that they have more in common than has been ordinarily understood to be the case. Essentially this thesis implies a re-evaluation of Rousseau whose radicalism was the target of Burke's rhetoric during the French Revolution. Cameron must argue that Rousseau was misunderstood by Burke and used by him as a symbol of the extremism of the revolution as well as show that Rousseau is both more cautious and less doctrinaire than he may appear. In this latter endeavour Cameron is supported by contemporary trends in Rousseau scholarship, and his achievement here is more in bringing this version of Rousseau to the Burke-Rousseau relationship than in any fresh vision of Rousseau. These remarks do not imply that the simple account of Burke as a mere conservative and traditionalist suffices for Cameron but only that the greatest changes required for the *rapprochement* he is attempting concern Rousseau.

Baldly stated, Cameron concludes that "Rousseau and Burke are similar in their negations, and similar in their efforts to elaborate what in their view would be a

more satisfactory account of political life" (p. 178). He arrives at this assertion by arguing that both Rousseau and Burke were dissatisfied with the dominant schools of thought about man and politics, that they believed that the bases for community were undermined by the teachings of their contemporaries, and that they were, therefore, in some way precursors of the new syntheses of the nineteenth century. These propositions are unexceptionable, as are the many citations from Rousseau proving his awareness of kinds of problems central to Burke's concern, such as reverence for tradition and concern for the common good. But the question is whether these are the only issues or the most important ones. One could, legitimately, find much in common between the language of Fascism and that of Communism, for they both begin with a critique of a common enemy, liberal society, and look forward to a new kind of community. But such a comparison would have to abstract from the whole intention of the teachings involved. And, in his quest for comparison or similarity, Cameron fails to persuade me that he has not focused on parts of Burke and Rousseau which fit his interest while neglecting or underplaying those parts which do not. It is, of course, extremely difficult to grasp the fundamental intention of a great thinker; but the comparison of two great thinkers on the broadest basis necessarily implies that both have been understood.

Now, Cameron's technique for operating the comparison is to elicit Rousseau's and Burke's responses to the most important schools in the tradition of political thought, particularly in their eighteenth century expressions. This compounds the difficulty of his procedure, for he not only needs to know his two chosen authors very well but must also make an adequate statement about the central meaning of each element of the tradition. This imposes an almost unbearable burden on this small book as well as putting a further filter between us and immediate contact with the primary authors. A large portion of the text is devoted to very general statements about the divisions among the various schools of thought. The tradition in this book acts as a kind of tribunal before which Burke and Rousseau are called to testify. The authority and authenticity of the tribunal, as well as the adequacy and completeness of the testimony, are questionable.

Cameron, basing himself most especially on Oakeshott but also on many others, presents three general views which constitute the divisions of the history of philosophy –

intellectualist, sensationalist, and idealist. The first two are as old as philosophy, the last a product of the nineteenth century. Cameron says that Burke and Rousseau are at the intersection of the three. He gives their opinions on the views of the two schools they knew and thus concludes that they have a deep harmony.

The politically relevant expressions of intellectualism and sensationalism in the eighteenth century Cameron calls the natural rights and the empiricist schools respectively. And it is here that the great difficulties with his book begin. It is highly doubtful whether the distinctions Cameron makes fit the matter or whether the tradition was similarly seen by Burke or Rousseau. Cameron is unable to put Locke squarely in one camp or the other, and Locke is perhaps the most decisive figure. (Cameron never gives a clear account of what Burke and Rousseau thought of Locke himself. He only discusses their reaction to these vague schools of later scholarly construction.) Hobbes he puts unequivocally with the empiricists although Hobbes is most explicit that he is a natural right teacher, and he was the first to make the distinction between right and law so important for the natural right school. This is but one example among many that I could give, but a particularly important one inasmuch as it indicates a difficulty in Cameron's understanding of natural right and explains the ease with which he is able to assert that Rousseau is not a natural-right thinker. Cameron refers to the rationalism of the natural-right thinkers and is able to point to Rousseau's attacks on reason. He fails to see that the modern natural-right thinkers, among whom Rousseau must be counted, all thought passion was more fundamental than reason and that there is one fundamental passion, that for self-preservation. Reason is only instrumental in the service of that passion. Rousseau, to the extent that he is less rationalist than Hobbes or Locke, is simply extending what they began. About this he is most explicit. Cameron to the contrary, in some of the most crucial passages Rousseau praises Hobbes very highly, as the man who solved the most important political problem and who saw the only sensible definition of natural right.

Following from this general framework is a list of general topics against which Cameron checks Burke and Rousseau. With respect to their notions of human nature, neither of them accepted natural right as it was formulated, Burke because it was too abstract, Rousseau because it implied a natural rationality which does not exist. Neither accepted the empiricist proposition

that man acts from self-interest alone. Both paid more attention to history and particularity than to nature and universality. Both had a notion of moral freedom as over against mere independence. So far as state and citizen are concerned, neither was a simple individualist or follower of abstract right or believer in the omnipotence of reason. Neither was optimistic about broad projects for the reform of society. Both were attached to the idea of community; both valued morals and tradition more than mere legalism; both moved away from the social contract as the basis of obligation to something higher, not founded only on calculation of private advantage. This is the sum of Cameron's analysis.

Each of these points of contact may be more apparent than real, a result of Cameron's desire to see unity rather than look for distinctions. Some of them, to be believed, require a blindness to the general thrust of the writings; and still others simply do not exist or are based on a loose reading of texts. For example, self-interest – interest in one's own preservation – is the primary *natural* motivation, the one before which all others give way, according to Rousseau. Man must either be *denatured* or his self-interest must be extended by a most careful education if he is to be social at all. The former solution is always questionable, the latter almost impossible to achieve. Rousseau accepted the fundamental character of self-love as presented by Hobbes. He is less hopeful than Hobbes about the feasibility of a decent society based on it. The natural self-love remains the dominant motive and concern in spite of all the accidents of history. Rousseau himself never suggests denaturing. He always tries to make duties flow from this primary source. History does not change the nature of man according to Rousseau as Cameron asserts. For Burke there do indeed seem to be other sources of motivation. Both see a problem in selfishness as the basis for civil society, but their views of the problem and their solutions are very different.

It seems perverse indeed to deny, as does Cameron, that nature is Rousseau's most important principle. The whole body of his works is a testimony to Rousseau's return to nature as the positive standard of judgment. That nature is a problem and that there is no simple return is doubtless true. But all of Rousseau's treatments of man's changes throughout time teach that those changes are good only to the extent that they can be harmonized with his nature. History does not give legitimacy; only nature does. For Burke history mitigates

nature; for Rousseau it usually disfigures it, but it can enhance nature by serving nature's ends. There is nothing similar to prescriptive right in Rousseau. Cameron again to the contrary, Rousseau is as radical as Paine in the rejection of the authority of antiquity. At every assembly the citizens in a legitimate regime must ask whether they should retain their constitution. It is desirable that, if the constitution is a good one, it have the added dignity of age, but age adds nothing to right. Such distinctions become fuzzy in Cameron's analysis.

Rousseau's formula for the general will accepts the premise of individualism. Everyone must remain as free as he was beforehand. This is even more radical than earlier individualist teachings which accepted the legitimacy of majority rule over the minority. The only way to achieve this is by generalizing the wills so that they do not conflict (and it must be remembered that the wills which are generalized are nothing but natural desires which then take on the form of reason as a result of their generalization). Rousseau's demands are so rigorous precisely because he insists on respect for natural freedom. Burke's community has common ends not derived from those of the individual. Rousseau's does not. All the objections to the mode and the substance of this book are epitomized by Cameron's comparison of Burke's "wisdom of the species" to Rousseau's legislator. He takes them, in some measure correctly, to be responses to typical Enlightenment thought, but he does not grasp to what extent they are opposed. Both notions give an account of the origins of customs and laws other than that provided by the notion of rational individuals in the state of nature making a contract. Both imply that a group of individuals cannot become a people in that way. But Rousseau suggests that a single man can with the use of his unaided reason discover the true principles of politics and by his skills as a leader singlehandedly found a people. This notion of the founder-legislator is a central theme of political philosophy from Plato through Machiavelli. Burke, on the other hand, denies that there can be such a founder and argues for the superiority of a historical development. It was by way of Burke that it came to be generally held that nations do not have founders but grow. One of his intentions in developing this teaching was to preclude the dangerous revolutionary temptations aroused by the idea of the founder. Nothing could show more clearly the fundamental opposition between Burke and Rousseau. Rousseau is still willing to consider and risk the extremes of conscious

foundings. But Cameron, on the one hand, takes the legislator to be a kind of *deus ex machina* whose role is somehow unreal (which shows how much we have been affected by the Burkean tradition); and, on the other, he seizes on a formal similarity in the functions of the legislator and the "wisdom of the species" and assimilates the two.

Moreover, the legislator's function is to take a group of men in particular circumstances and adjust them to fit the universal principles of legitimacy. Burke's prescription moves in precisely the opposite direction, from bare universal naturalness to the particular ways of this nation here and now which constitute a way of life and a justice superior to any that nature and individual reason could devise. It inclines us to see the desirability of our own ways and makes it hard to find a way out of them. Rousseau's intransigent principles always incline us to dissatisfaction; they provide a standard for criticism of the here and now which Burke was intent on destroying. That both Rousseau and Burke refer to the need for morals and traditions is a secondary matter, for they are means to different ends. The fact that Rousseau is not too hopeful about the actualization of a good regime only shows how far the desirable is from the possible or probable. It does not mean it should not be attempted. Rousseau's moderation, to the extent it exists, is founded in melancholy, Burke's in the reconciliation with the present.

I conclude that Cameron has not demonstrated his thesis. He has had to ignore too much and take too much for granted. Rousseau's extreme rejection of modern commercialism and luxury, of monarchy and aristocracy, of the society devoted to arts and sciences, his admiration for the ancient republics, his reform of religion, and his radical egalitarianism, and, perhaps most important of all, his preference for the life of the solitary over that of the citizen, are all given short shrift by Cameron. Burke was on the opposite side of all these questions. But this book does point to the real facts that Rousseau knew much more about the practice of politics than he is often credited with and that Burke was aware of the limits which principle places on practical politics and the devotion to one's own. One could only wish that Professor Cameron had abandoned his heavy apparatus and his simplistic desire to compare and used his obvious gifts to make a straightforward study of the principles of statesmanship and the relations between theory and practice as elaborated by these two extraordinary observers.

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